Chapter 1: Prologue

Understanding the Lives of Miners

In this thesis I seek to study the development of the mining society in the Jharia coalfields, which have been parts of the Bengal province until 1911, Bihar and Orissa province until 1936, and the Bihar province during the rest of colonial rule and after independence. I seek to unravel the meaning of work and the development of the productive forces, in the period between the 1890s – the decade the mines were set up – and 1971-73 when the nationalisation of mines introduced a new political-economic regime. I examine the qualitative development of the social forces at both material and politico-cultural levels.

My thesis subjects some of the assumptions of liberal, modernization theory to critical scrutiny. Modernization theories have celebrated industrialism as the source of common good or general well-being. Within this frame, modern entrepreneurs and the invisible hands of the market appear as the driving forces of development. A few adherents of the theory have projected the image of two discrete and distinct stages of industrial society. The first stage represented a time of difficulty for the commoners. By the second stage – when the industrial economy matures – workers begin to enjoy a marked improvement in the conditions of living and work. Hours of work shorten, wages rise, employment conditions are codified, work becomes more regular, working-class children are educated, social insurance provisions, workplace safety measures and compensation schemes are introduced. These benefits were subsequently withdrawn, the conventional assumption suggests, in the era of informalisation and contractualisation of labour, process that began from the 1970s in Western developed countries, and from the 1990s in India.
In line with critical social theories, I question the liberal assumption of this frame, the unproblematic association of industrialization with progress. I ask what did the move to short work day mean to the colliers? How were the rules and regulations experienced? How were the varied relations of exploitation within the mines? How did the miners respond to the degradation of their labour; the sense of their alienation from work, and the problem of uneven development? At the same time, I draw attention to the translucence of those conceptual processes.

With the growth of industrial society not only does the working population expand, it gets differentiated. My thesis looks into the way lives of workers, their activities, their identities, are mediated by caste, gender and ethnicity. I also ask how the conflict of labour and capital, and the specific context of the labour regimes in the mines structured the visions and attitudes of workers, how it altered the ideological and political matrix in which the individuals operated. I seek to question the deterministic logic of an argument that foregrounds the power of pre-bourgeois [eastern Indian] culture in the lives of workers (Chakrabarty, 1989), or the argument that focuses on political authority and business strategies in exploring the making of working classes (Chandavarkar, 1994).

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The Jharia coalfields are located about 100 ft. above the sea level. They lie in a shallow crescent shaped basin – roughly, sickle shaped – about 22 miles long and 14 miles broad, in the north of Damodar River. This area falls in the district of Manbhum (present-day Dhanbad), and is located 170 miles west of the port-town of Calcutta or Kolkata. The mining work began here on a significant scale and for commercial purpose from 1894-95, as the East India and Bengal Nagpur Railways connected the coalfields to the wider coal market: Coal could now flow out of the region with ease. Supplies went to the railways, the military and civil shipping companies, the textile mills, the factories of iron and steel, the tea and engineering manufactories, and the brick kilns.
The coal measures of the Jharia coalfields cover 175 sq. miles. Geological science suggests that this area is part of the Gondwana (Permian) measure formed through the process of sedimentation that happened more than five 500,000 years ago. The average thickness of coal seams in this region is 30 feet deep, though some of them are over 100 feet. The seams have a gentle incline of about 8 to 10 degrees. The field is a faulted basin with the larger axes trending slightly south of east. The cross and oblique faults affect the coal measures, which are also intruded by dykes and sills, thereby resulting in the loss of many million tons of high grade coking coal. By 1960-61, the geological survey department recorded as far as 18 valuable coal seams in the Barakar measures placed at the disposal of the Jharia fields, a number of these come out of the surface. The thickness of these seams ranges from 3 to 90 feet and totals more than 200 feet of coal. According to early industrial surveys the first nine seams from the bottom are of poor quality; hence, the mining operators concentrated on the working of coal seams number 10 to 18. In the upper levels, there are 6 workable seams with a total thickness of about 50 feet, and the incline of the seams is normally moderate, with gradients of 1 and 8 or being common.

The Jharia coalfields evolved over time as the largest coal-producing zone in South Asia, attracting capital and labourers into the region. As early as 1919-20, coal raisings in the region touched 12 million tons a year and the overall number of workers engaged was more than 100,000.¹ The fields were significant because of two more facts. First, it produced around one half of the total coal output in British India, and almost three fourth of the total output of coal in the province of Bihar and Orissa. Secondly, it was one of the chief destinations for labourers, in search for work, in Eastern India. Only three other streams were more important, the ones flowing to the Assam tea gardens, the Calcutta textile mills, and the Jamshedpur Iron and Steel Plants.

I should draw attention at the outset to a few features of the sources of finance and the markets of commodity and labour, since these had a bearing on labour-management relationship. The collieries were located within zamindary lands until their abolition in mid 1950s. The owner of capital took the land on lease and hired the services of managing agencies and contractors to manage the production process and the marketing of the coal. The entrepreneurs came to the region from a wide range of
professions, including mining, agriculture, banking, money lending, trading, construction works. Some were labour contractors, others were propertied professionals. The coal companies could not afford, as late as 1936, any mining expert as advisor in the board (Burrows, 1937: 6-30). The colliery companies used managing agencies to take care of the market of coal, procure the finances, and supply the necessary technology and personnel.

The coalfields constantly complained of limited demand for coal. The railways were the main consumer and had a monopsonic control over the trade. It had in fact a surplus of coal supply from its captive mines. The industry also faced a problem of transportation of coal. Again, the railways were the chief means of transportation. Its limited capacity meant that heaps of non-disposed coal lay around the collieries. Not until the era of planned development in the 1950s did the industry free itself of these problems.

By the 1920s, the industry managed to effectively overcome the constraint of labour supplies. Yet, it continued to face the problem of a limited pool of skilled and literate workforce who would be willing to work at low wages, in the 'dusty' and 'rough' mines. I explore in different chapters of the thesis the conditions responsible for the particular ways of handling the question of supply of labour, credit, and technology. I also examine the pressures that accounted for changes in these spheres.

The Jharia Coalfields had three varieties of coalmine: pits, inclines, and quarries. The raising and dispatching of coal from the mines called for the employment of associative labour on underground and surface works, as well as educational, research and development centres. Gangs of coalcutters (malcuttas) and loaders extracted coal from coal seams, collected coal pieces in baskets, and carried these to tubs or carts kept at some distance from the working faces in collieries. The team of CP miners (responsible for using Compressed Gun Powder) carried explosives and conducted blasting. The drillers made holes in coal seams. The team of machine drivers operated coal-cutting machines to cut coal. The gang of trammers hauled tubs (garees) from working faces to pit mouth and put tramlines in order. The line-mistry put up and repaired tramlines. The timber-mistry laid down propping arrangements. The water-
bailer removed seepage-water. The onsetter, banksman, and engineman on steam engine managed the shaft system. The pumpman, the haulage-man, the electrician, the mechanical engineer, the tub-checking clerk, the attendance clerk (hazari-babu), popularly known as sarkar, the surface-trammer, the shale-picker, the wagon-loader and the payment clerk (called babus) were responsible for certain respective tasks that were supportive in nature, making possible the actual production tasks. The mining sirdar or gang sirdar allocated working faces to gang members, examined safety necessaries, undertook or guided the blasting operation, and led his gang men to meet certain contingency. The surveyor inspected and reported on the condition of advancement of the working phases. The overman inspected geological condition and oversaw the supplies of safety and production materials. The shift-in-charge (Assistant Manager) looked after the general supervision of persons employed and the supplies of logistics. The personnel constituting the colliery authority were the labour recruiter (called sirdar); the managing or raising contractor who organized coal raisings and dispatches; the manager (mining-engineer) who carried out planning and execution of mining schemes. The agent, besides the managing agency, the proprietor, and the shareholders, held on the highest (but distant) command, looked after business accountancy and the circulation of commodity.

The basic labour-process in and about the coalmine, elaborated above, evolved only over decades in correspondence with the necessity of re/generation of surplus value as well as safety arrangement. The social relations amongst the different members put to work in the labour process were issues with substantial bearing on the performance of associative labour-power.

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Let me introduce the structure of the thesis. Part I is on ‘Time, Work, and Politics’. It has two chapters which investigate how the relationship between work and time changes over the period of my study. The first of these two chapters discusses how the labour regime developed in the early period, characterised by long days and flexible hours. The
second chapter seeks to understand what happens when the workday is shortened, and new regulations are introduced regarding hours of work, and how this leads to a new regime of discipline characterised by intensive work and a unified time process.

I deal with the problem of work hazards and the question of safety and health in Part II of the thesis entitled ‘Precarious Life, Terrible Work’. This part has three chapters. The annual reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines provide us with detailed accounts of the conditions of mines: pointing to the lapses in policy, the causes of accidents, and the safety measures introduced. The first chapter in this series discusses the classification of the work hazards and the human loss in the context of the penal system that was instituted. The second chapter explores the morphology of accidents, in an attempt to understand what happens within the mines, and why accidents occurred. The third chapter looks at the way miners negotiated the mines, the way their experiences, cosmologies, beliefs, and politics mediated their efforts to come to grips with the problems within the mines.

Part III – ‘Life in the Mines’ – has three chapters dealing with three different aspects of colliery life. Chapter seven enquires into the relationship among four variables: the reproduction (consumption) necessity, the work efforts of miners, the wage returns, and the wage relationships in the industry. Chapter eight discusses the impact of protective legislations concerning women and children on social life within the collieries. It asks: how did the families of miners grapple with questions of dignity, and the desire for humanisation of industrial life? The ninth chapter looks at the culture of clinking.

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The thesis is based on the study of archival sources in the various record rooms, published reports, folkloric traditions, and ethnographic fieldwork. The oral accounts and miners’ tales and songs have provided a picture of life that we cannot grasp from official sources. In the field work I have had long interactions with many miners; some of them (two dozen) were individuals who joined the Jharia coalfields by the early 1960s. All of them are second and third generation colliers. They lived in the collieries,
were steeped in the culture of the area, and knew a stock of stories and tales about the past. They gave an access to personal lives that I could not have from any other sources. At times I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected biographical information. Unfortunately I found it difficult to have access to female interviewees. I could talk to no more than half of dozen women. Even with them I found it difficult to undertake any uninterrupted interviews. These are the problems any male observer has to inevitably face. However, I have utilised as best as I could, the insights I gathered from my six-and-half-months stay in the coalfield, alongside the miners' families. They treated me as their guests, allowed me to observe their production rituals, and provided access to their funds of tales, their reminiscences of the olden days. If my thesis has managed to provide any understanding of their personal experiences and lives, it is due to this interaction. I am of course aware that such oral sources have to be subjected to critical interrogation. That is, however, true even of written sources.

Notes

1 If we include the dependants of mining persons, the colliery population numbered about 800,000 by the end of the 1950s.

2 Indian Mining Federation (1963:17-19, 247). For a detail discussion on the business economy of the coal company, see Simmons (1974:10-16). There were fourteen joint stock companies in 1897, with a total paid capital of more than one crore of rupees. It expanded in 1896-1906 and especially during the coal boom 1906-08. 276 companies were registered on the Calcutta Stock Exchange, with over ten crores of rupees by 1920-21. Many of these companies invested primarily in the Jharia fields. The coal companies relied on more than a dozen managing agencies roped in to look after their business. The Bengal Coal Co. Ltd., formed in 1843 in the Ranigungee field by certain Indian and British merchants, was the first Joint Stock Coal Co. European merchant houses launched the Burraur coal Co. (1890), East Indian Coal Co. (1893), Bengal Nagpur Coal Co. (1890) and the Khas Jharia Coal Co. (1893) as Joint Stock Co. to exploit the Jharia coalfields. In contrast, most early Indian firms were small and medium sized family and partnership firms, excluding [six] big Indians controlled Joint Stock Cos. seen by the latter 1930s. Mr. A. C. Laik, one of the founders of the Messrs. Laik & Banerjee Co. (1890s) was former clerical staff of the Bengal Coal Co. Ltd.; Jadav Banerjee, the second partner, was a timekeeper under the same company. Mr. W.C. Banerjee, founder of the Banerjee & Co., was former Professor of Mathematics. The Cutchi businesspersons (the Ojhas, the Gujarias) were former construction and labour contractors associated with the Grand Chord Line of the East Indian Railway. The Marwaris (the Jatias, the Goenkas, the Poddars, the Karnanis and the Agarwallas) and the Punjabis (Thappars and Khannas) investors were former coal merchants, bankers, speculators and raising contractors.

3 Burrows (1937:9-32). For a discussion on the place of managing agency in Indian economic life, see Kling (1994) and Simmons (1974:16-30). A dozen mining agencies (pre-eminent Europeans) were big players and commanded three-fourth to two-third of the total output until WWII. In 1911, ten agencies controlled not less than 75 of the 123 Joint Stock Companies in existence, and accounted for Rs. 5.01 crores of the Rs. 5.85 crores of rupees invested in the industry in British India. Four of them (Andrew Yule & Comp., Birds & Co., F.W. Heilgers & Co., and Macneills & Co.) controlled 45.01 percent of the total
output in 1913-14. They produced high quality coal, hence were price setters in the market. Moreover, most of the large companies acted as sale channels through which the small collieries disposed their outputs. These agencies had both direct and indirect financial interests in some of their managed companies, but only in a very few instances did this amount to anything approaching a control of 51 percent holding. The average agents' share of the capital of the companies under their management in all industries remained stationary at 15 percent in 1921/22—1938/39. It fell to 6.7 percent by 1958; although, they enjoyed command over a greater portion of share-capital of the companies, for the shares held by their relatives, friends, and partners. It helped them exercise their control on certain coal companies.

Only a few Indians initially floated managing agencies. Their number definitely grew as the Indianisation of industrial capital slowly took place since the mid 1920s. The managing agencies, like H.V. Low & Co., Villiers & Comp., Meleods & Co., and Martine & Co. came under indigenous ownership by the mid 1930s, in terms of the directorships. By 1940, there were relatively few companies without Indian representatives in directorial board. Indians secured 78 percent of capital share, and while the stock holding of most of the companies was in Indian hands by 1946-49. About 70 percent of the total output was, by 1948, from largely Indian owned companies and the majority of the directors were Indians by 1950/55, although were under direct control of the foreign managing agencies, as Indian shareholders took little participation in the management of the production process. The scenario underwent drastic change only from the late 1950s, when Indian controlled companies preferred to replace the managing agencies in favour of the directorial management (The Investors India Year Book (IYB), 1963, 1969). The government of India abolished the managing agency system in 1970.

The mining sirdar and the overman constituted the most important of the supervisory and safety staff.